



Walking a Tightrope

Unaccompanied migrant young
people, transitions and futures

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Edited by Francesca Meloni, Elaine Chase, Semhar Haile
with the collaboration of Praxis Community Projects and Shpresa Programme

Acknowledgments

This photography project was part of an ESRC-funded research project:

Becoming Adult: Conceptions of Futures and Wellbeing among Migrant Young People in the UK

www.becomingadult.net

We would like to thank Shpresa Programme and Praxis Community Projects for their continuous support and collaboration in this work. Most of all, we wish to thank all the young people who participated in the photography workshops and shared their thoughts and experiences.

About the Research Project

The ESRC-funded project *Becoming Adult: Conceptions of Futures and Wellbeing among Migrant Young People in the UK* analyses the experiences and intentions for the future of young men and women who migrated alone to the UK as children, as they make the transition to institutional 'adulthood'. It examines how young people in this situation conceptualise and seek to realise their futures and maintain a sense of wellbeing; and the extent to which there is a fit between young people's conceptualisations of their futures and immigration and social care policies. The research focuses on the experiences of young people aged 17–25 years from three different countries of origin (Albania, Afghanistan, and Eritrea). The team, led by Dr Elaine Chase (University College London) and Dr Nando Sigona (University of Birmingham) includes: Professor Dawn Chatty (University of Oxford); Dr Francesca Meloni (University College London); Dr Rachel Humphris (University of Birmingham); and Jenny Allsopp (University of Oxford) and a core team of expert project assistants including: Maranata Geday, Klesti Gorce, Semhar Haile, Shafiq Hussaini, Daniel Muhr, Habib Rezaie, Winta Tewodros, Gullivan Zada, Mohammad Zameree.

<https://becomingadult.net/about-becoming-adult/>

<https://thewellwishers.wordpress.com/>



BECOMING
ADULT



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Introduction

The venture of this photo booklet was born out of a kind of discomfort. Semhar and Francesca were both working as part of the ESRC-funded 'Becoming Adult' project, investigating the experiences and transitions of former unaccompanied children in the UK. One day, over a cup of tea and cakes, they talked about how the research project was developing. Semhar, who at that time was transcribing some interviews for the research, expressed her concerns about the limitations of interviews in getting a deep understanding of young people's experiences and perceptions about wellbeing. Francesca also shared similar worries. How can we grasp the complexity of people's perspectives and trajectories, when words can only fail the experiences we have lived? When we are lost in translation, and in the multiple cultural meanings of concepts such as wellbeing? And when young people who come to the UK and claim asylum have to tell their own story so many times to the Home Office? They shared the discomfort sometimes encountered while carrying out research interviews. They felt interview spaces were at times too constraining, too defining, or that they risked reproducing, even if unintentionally, the violence of the asylum process. In the effort of creating a space of dialogue where both researchers and young people were more at ease in sharing experiences and reflections, they proposed to young people the idea of using photography as a medium of expression. As demonstrated from the work in this booklet, this idea was met with an enthusiastic response.

With the collaboration of Praxis Community Projects and Shpresa Programme, a series of photography workshops were conducted with young people from different backgrounds who have gone through similar experiences of migration. Many of these people came to the UK on their own as children, without their family. Their images narrate the difficult and continuous journey they make, and the life changing transitions that this journey entailed. It is a journey without a clear point of departure or arrival - or a clear sense of direction - but which brings multiple transformations and transitions along the way. People have to negotiate completely different cultural, social and political environments and, most importantly, the constraints of an exclusionary asylum system that has profound effects on their everyday lives. These young people often live with the terrifying uncertainty of not knowing what will happen to them or whether they will be returned to the country from which they have fled.

Things become most difficult for migrant young people when they turn 18 years old. For a significant number, this transition to institutional adulthood corresponds with a 'transition into illegality', as they lose their status as 'children' and their legal status becomes more precarious. Becoming adult is like, as one young person puts it, "walking the tightrope": holding tightly to try to keep your balance and not fall down. At this point, it is not always easy to imagine bright possibilities and futures around the corner, and yet many people still keep a spark of hope. They actively create together new spaces of becoming and belonging and a collective voice which they ask to be heard.

We are profoundly thankful to the young people who have participated in the workshops, and to the organisations that have collaborated in this process. We let the images and the words that young people have written speak for themselves, to resonate with you, and to ask questions beyond our zones of comfort.

Francesca Meloni, Semhar Haile, Elaine Chase



Raw reality, *Ergest*

This illustration shows the gradient of emotions of a person who is struggling with a harsh reality. The process of mark making resembles the journey of a young vulnerable child who faces a life changing transition. This is my interpretation of these marks, which are visual imprints of the anxiety that people experience when they leave their home and find themselves alone in a whole new world.

Ergest



Dark, *Brighter Futures Group*

Enlightenment could overcome the darkness.

Brighter Futures Group



Lift out of order, *Brighter Futures Group*

We've got to live with it.

Brighter Futures Group



Learning to live alone, *Elona*

Life is the most difficult exam. Becoming adult and living alone, we will need to test ourselves in everything, and we should pass in order to survive. For me, one of the hardest parts of life is deciding whether to walk away or to try harder. Dealing with the Home Office and all the problems is very stressful for young people who come to the UK. It is so hard when people cannot understand you. But it is even harder when you cannot understand yourself anymore because of the hard life and problems you have to face. These problems affect your mind, your life, your goals, and you don't know what to do! Becoming adult is not easy. Living alone makes it even more difficult. We have to do everything on our own, and perhaps we have to do many things at the same time. It is challenging. Some people will get sick of it... some others will get stronger.

Elona



Invisible warzone, *Ergest*

The subject appears to portray himself as confident. This is because of his body language. But through the x-ray, you can see his inner thoughts and feelings. From my personal experience, looked-after children are not able to express their emotions because of language and cultural barriers, or because they are often misunderstood by the society.

Ergest



Black and white, *Elona*

People say that life for young people is full of colours, full of opportunities and full of reasons to be happy and to enjoy life. But this is not true for everyone who comes to the UK and becomes adult. Some young people – like the girl portrayed in the picture – struggle to keep their head up and achieve their aims. There is always something that shuts everything down for them – the Home Office, and all the difficulties they have to face while they try to survive as young adults on their own. Their lives are like 'black and white'. Black is every cell in their bodies shouting THEY'RE USELESS because they can't do anything until they get their status. And this is not because they don't want to, but because they are not allowed. White is the hope that attempts to survive within their soul, even if the black cells are trying to kill it every day!

Elona



Sad and alone, *Brighter Futures Group*

She is thinking how to solve her problems. It can be difficult to climb the steps but never lose your hopes. Our journey starts together. For us, to start this journey we have to decide what we want in life.

Brighter Futures Group



The girl and the blanket, *Bes*

In this lonely world the only support you've got left is your blanket. It's the only thing that holds you in your hardest times, when you want to cry, when you want to shout, when you feel alone and, most importantly, when you feel cold. The blanket is the only thing that gives you the warmth of home.

Alba



Waiting, Brighter Futures Group



The tunnel of the asylum process, Fatjon

This horrible and scary mask means the Home Office to me. And the tunnel – the darkness of it – is really scary. It means that it is hard going through the asylum process and all this stuff. Inside that tunnel, we can't see the end of it. We don't know what it's going to happen with our lives, we don't know what they are going to decide for us. They decide for us, our lives are in their hands.

Elona



The scary mask, Ibrahim

Every time I wake up screaming – shouting, sometimes even crying. Every night the same scary face stalks me. It is as if he knows all my moves, where I am going, what I am doing, everything. His shadow is always there. And now it's even in my dreams. But it doesn't feel like just a dream. It feels real. Every night I see his big head, with big scary eyes, looking through my soul. Eyes that can shut you down with only a look. And he has this large mouth and he is going to eat you. It's just like a horror movie. If the Home Office would have a face, I think this would be the perfect one. A scary face that will stalk you for your whole life.

Alba



Walking the tightrope, Bruna

Life as an adult is like walking a tightrope and trying not to fall down. It doesn't feel easy for an adult to make his future life on his own. So he is holding tightly on the tightrope to try to keep his way on balance.

Ibrahim

If you would be in our position, you would see how thin our route to the future is. You don't have many choices for university, work or anything. Your choices are very limited. So you have this thin rope and you are trying to walk it. You have to make hard decisions and, at the same time, you have to keep your balance and try not to fall.

Alba



The steps of life, *Elona*

Life is a series of steps. Things are done gradually. Some people take these steps alone, there are no 'electrical stairs' that help them to go up easily. These become difficult steps of life, you have to take these small steps very carefully, and work very hard to climb to the top.

Elona



The innocence, *Ergest*

The expressive marks appear to be very sharp and piercing. These are the marks developed by a child who has experienced trauma and distress in his surroundings. The controversial aspect of it is the child's innocence and the beautiful yet painful intentions.

Ergest



The net, *Bruna*

This image says a lot to me. The presence of a net means all the situations, problems, difficulties that a person could face during the life. The guy is smiling. He is happy, he brought his head up from these problems in life. He got his refugee status. But if you see carefully, he still has his feet caught in the net: he is going to have some bad memories of all the things he has been through.

Brunilda



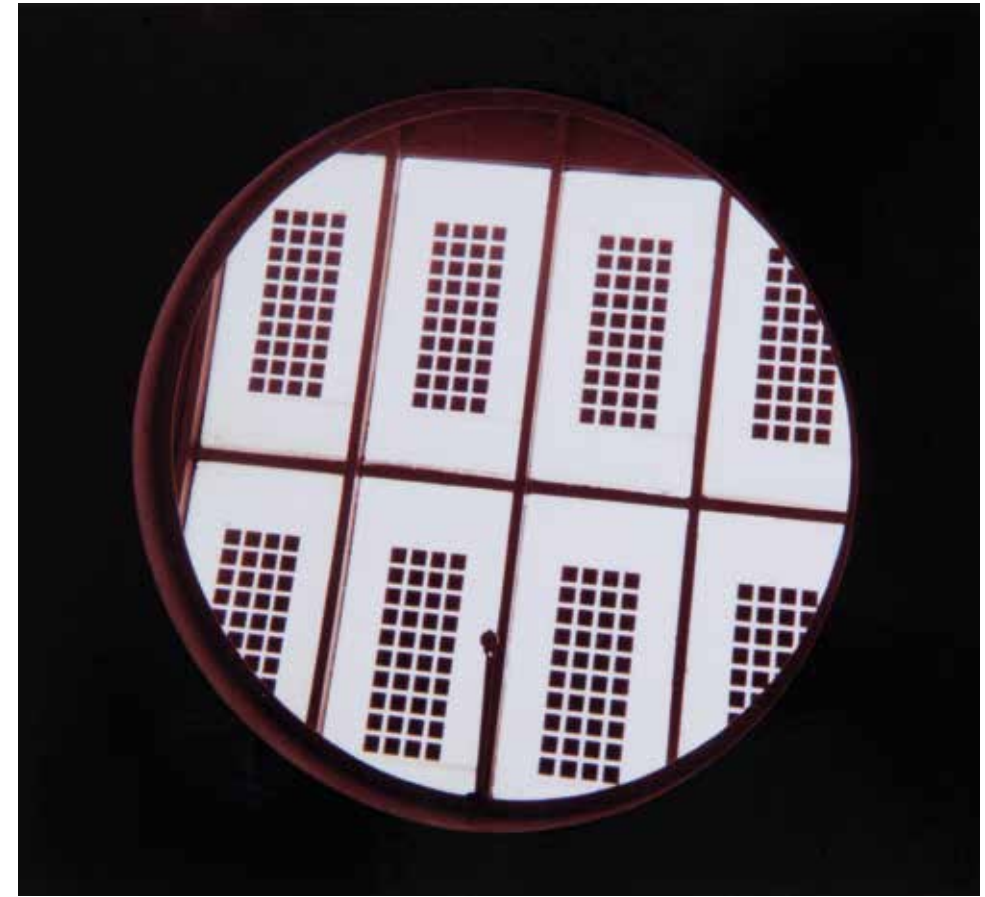
Light, *Ibrahim*

In everyone's life, regardless of the way they live, there is hope. The sun, which passes through the trees in the middle of the forest, makes you feel that there is still a little hope.

Elona and Brunilda



Hope, *Brighter Futures Group*



Bright in the darkness, *Brighter Futures Group*

Sometimes we reach darkness but we have to look for the light to find hope. There is hope in everything, there is light at the end of the tunnel, always remember this. Life could be full of sadness but with friends everything could change. Don't lose your hope, stay positive, and we can achieve our aims. No condition is permanent.

Brighter Futures Group



Freedom, *Brighter Futures Group*

When things become difficult, try to get away. Try to be free and to unload all your burdens.

Brighter Futures Group



Being yourself, *Ikir*

This is a picture I took in Croydon. For me it represents diversity. Back home, difference is not celebrated in all its forms. I feel that in London, it is easier to be yourself. You can go unnoticed. People walk around and they can be invisible in the middle of so many other people, if they want. They can express themselves and how they choose to be. I really love this about life here in UK.

Ikir



Life, *Brighter Futures Group*

Bicycles roll by
People searching
For their goals, dreams and life
No matter the rain drops
Still keep riding.
Loneliness is hidden in their eyes.

Brighter Futures Group



At peace, *Brighter Futures Group*

Relaxation. Happiness. At peace.
Lord is for everyone.

Brighter Futures Group



Happy, *Brighter Futures Group*

Our journey starts together

Brighter Futures Group



Trust, *Brighter Futures Group*

A bird, Paddington station, at 3pm
Loneliness everywhere
Searching for help.
Just because we lost our happiness
The trees were laughing at her.
Air was giving sympathy
The sky was looking at her
Roads giving place to relax herself.
Nature makes her feel good
She hopes one day she will fly again.

Brighter Futures Group



